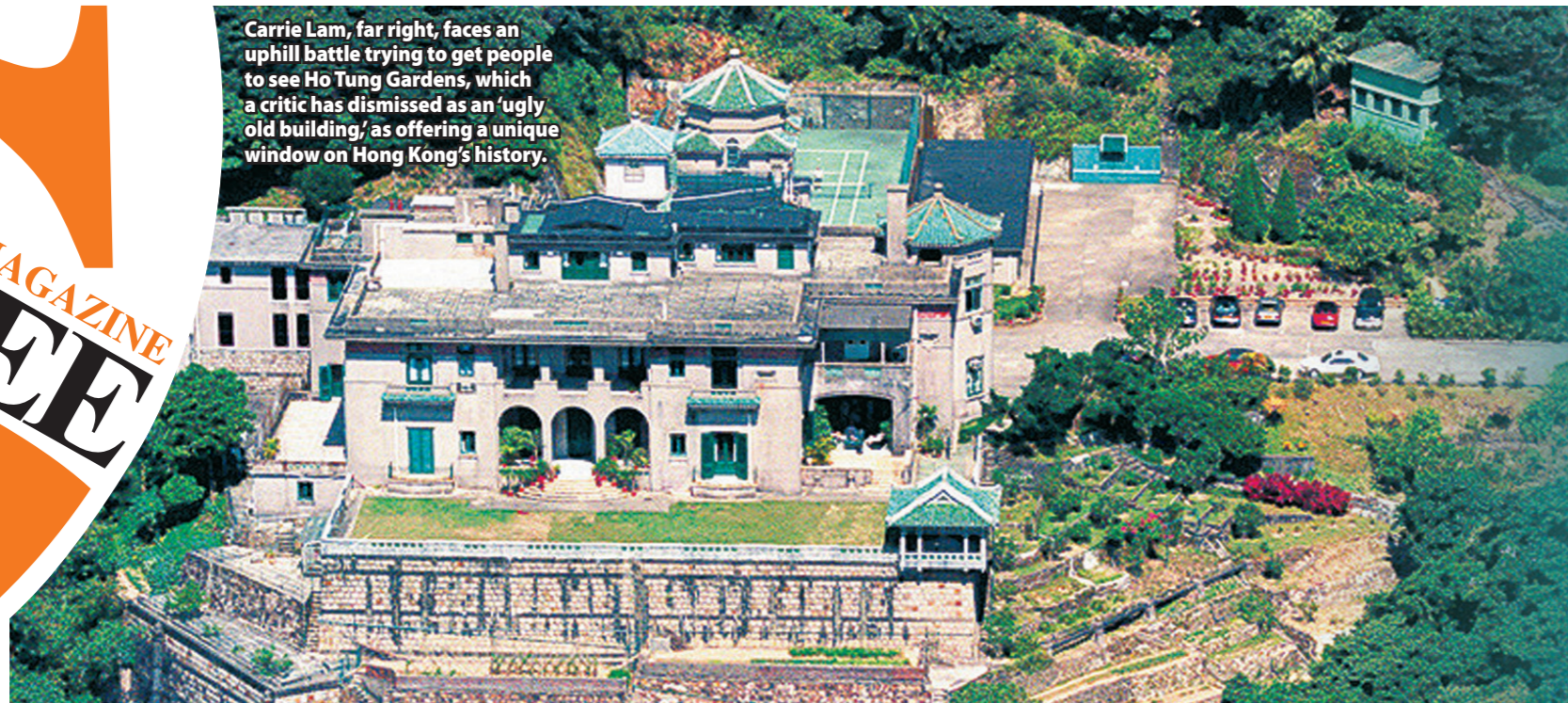


# WEEKEND MAGAZINE SPREE



Carrie Lam, far right, faces an uphill battle trying to get people to see Ho Tung Gardens, which a critic has dismissed as an 'ugly old building,' as offering a unique window on Hong Kong's history.

# HAUNTED BY PAST

### Ho Tung Gardens could cost taxpayers a staggering \$3 billion, despite doubts about its historic importance. Phila Siu reports



## CULTURE 22



## FOOD 23



## FAST TRACK 24



## OUT & ABOUT 25

**H**EATED TALK WAS neither expected nor heard after a decision was reached last month that a super-rich man's long-ago property buy on The Peak should be cherished and be a protected monument.

For debate about preserving Ho Tung Gardens – a mansion and a garden including a pavilion and a five-story pagoda – has been a small-circle affair since it started a year ago.

That was after present owner Ho Min-kwan, a granddaughter of Robert Ho Tung Bosman – the Eurasian better known as Sir Robert Hotung, who changed the face of business and society in this part of the world and a lot beyond it – was all set to demolish and redevelop.

It didn't capture public attention like other tussles over old structures have done because members of the Antiquities Advisory Board were all for declaring the Ho Tung Gardens a protected monument.

The board was given a strong push in that direction by Secretary for Development Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-Ngor after the gardens were given a year's temporary protection from the demolition squad on January 28.

Lam had stepped in after Ho Min-kwan's redevelopment plans received outline approval from the Buildings Department in December as her application did not violate restrictions.

Ho, in her seventies, wanted to demolish the mansion (where she still lives) and have 10 residences in modern townhouse style built on the site. It has a buildable area of about 60,000 square feet – half of the overall spread. She planned to occupy one of the townhouses.

It has looked like smooth sailing for Lam since Ho was stymied, which made for a welcome change after some of the buffeting she has taken over other buildings being razed.

But there could be another rough ride in store for Lam, because the outlook on the gardens and debate on the issue looks set to expand into a much wider circle and with jagged edges.

The monument decision, in fact, could hit the wrecker's ball soon after it lands on the desk of Chief Executive Donald Tsang Yam-kuen for endorsement or rejection either by him or the Executive Council.

But if it is allowed to proceed, the administration must then go to the legislature for funding the public takeover of the gardens, and that could cost taxpayers HK\$3 billion. That's to compensate for Ho Min-kwan's loss of the right to redevelop the site.

On top of that hefty price tag, the government has to find a parcel of land to Ho's liking that she will accept as a swap.

The prospects of this weight on the public purse are now starting to be aired, with commentators warning to a debate about whether the gardens have the bloom of intrinsic value to justify the outlay while riding over the rights of an owner to make the most of a property.

That the saving of Ho Tung Gardens is being pushed through without a public consultation also nags. Who knows, some of the activists who marched in recent times against demolitions could soon be going the other way, though there has not been any show of popular concern as yet.

Preservationists in the case of Ho Tung Gardens, especially advisers to the Antiquities Advisory Board, argue that the estate on The Peak's southern slope

– looking across Aberdeen Country Park to the islands rather than from the more popular Victoria Harbour-facing side – provides a unique window on Hong Kong's history and a first loosening of the colonial grip.

For after the property off Peak Road known as The Falls was bought from a colonial stockbroker by Robert Hotung in 1923 and had a couple of adjoining plots tagged on, it opened the way for the many-roomed, four-story mansion that stands today to be built by 1927.

It has been marked up as a historical milestone because it was the first time a "Chinese" was allowed to build a home with local lines in what had been a foreigner-only zone – though while Hotung's mother was from Shenzhen his father was from Holland.

Historians who claim to know their architectural lines also point to the mansion as one of the earliest "Chinese Renaissance" designs in Hong Kong. It's among the few that still stand today, though the others – King Yin Lei, Haw Par Mansion and Dragon Garden – came later.

Yet great man though he was as he amassed extraordinary wealth through a range of business interests – putting Jardine Matheson on the right track as its head comprador was an early and much-quoted success – and forged a family that made many contributions to Hong Kong, China and the world, one of the things Robert Hotung (1862-1956) didn't do was to live at Ho Tung Gardens. He preferred a pile in Mid-Levels known as Idlewild as his Hong Kong residence.



Robert Hotung changed the face of Hong Kong business, society and a lot beyond.

The Ho who made the gardens what they are today was one of his wives, Clara Lin-kok. She was actually his second wife if you go by order of marriage, but she refused to accept Robert Hotung's proposal that he made when it was realized his first wife, Margaret Mak, could not bear children. There'd be no suggestion of concubine attached to her name, Clara said.

So demonstrating that money has always talked, Robert Hotung had Clara legally recognized as an "equal wife" – a unique accomplishment – when they married in 1881. She would go on to bear him three sons and seven daughters.

It was Clara, a devoted Buddhist, who moved to The Falls and shaped the mansion and gardens, working with architects Palmer and Turner on the mansion – and no doubt paying particular attention to its Chinese features and flourishes.

Robert Hotung was no more than a visitor to the property that remained The Falls until Clara died in 1938. That was when Robert Hotung's only real mark was made there with a gateway to Clara's memory and a changing of the name to Ho Tung Gardens.

This blurring of historical facts concerning the big Hotung breakthrough and how he made his mark on The Peak was raised among other quibbles by Ho Min-kwan.

Besides the house not being her grandfather's residence, she claims that the mansion is not distinguished architecturally, and with it being largely hidden from view she questions what public interest there is in maintaining it.

Ho, who told the government formally yesterday that she opposes its position on the gardens becoming a monument, could go to court with some of her points before all is said and done. And she could have some experts on her side.

One architect agrees that the mansion's design is hardly special; others see it as no more than a European-style block with Chinese characteristics.

Among critics, Tony Lam Chung-wai, chairman of the Hong Kong Institute of Architects' Heritage and Conservation Committee, says the garden's build-

ings "are not first class aesthetically," and certainly not as elaborate as King Yin Lei.

But, he adds, architecture can be worth conserving if it comes with a story, and the Chinese Renaissance architecture combined with a fine garden makes for a delightful scene at The Peak. The combination of Western and Chinese architectural styles was also rare in the 1920s, he says.

Heritage Hong Kong director Alexander Hui Yat-chuen supports preservation in general. And, he says, "it's rare that a mansion with such a history is preserved this well and with such beautiful scenery. It is representative of the colonial era, and there are hardly any other similar mansions in Hong Kong now."

That Robert Hotung was among the most influential people in Asia had to count for a lot, too, Hui says, and that he blazed a trail on The Peak by stepping across the law that had kept locals from building there should not be diminished.

"It was the time when the automobile became popular," Hui adds. "This is very important. The Peak became less exclusive to other Hongkongers and a lot of people started going to see what it was like up there."

Even though Hui believes Ho Tung Gardens are worth conserving, he says Ho Min-kwan's wishes should be respected as "the person who knows the most about the site is the owner."

He also criticizes the government for saying that conserving the site is in the public interest when it has not carried out a public consultation.

### Conspicuous Chinese aesthetic

Assistant architecture professor Lee Ho-yin of the University of Hong Kong, who was invited by the Antiquities and Monuments Office to carry out a study of the garden, says the traditional Chinese architectural style was becoming less popular – certainly in Hong Kong – when this Peak estate was shaped in the 1920s. Among striking aspects for him is that the mansion blends Chinese and Western lines.

It's likely the earliest surviving example of Chinese Renaissance architecture in Hong Kong, Lee adds, and it also predates many examples in the mainland.

A report to the Antiquities Advisory Board by him and two other experts explains that the choice of a conspicuous Chinese aesthetic character for the mansion was a deliberate challenge to discrimination against Hong Kong's Chinese community by the colonial authorities and the socially advantaged European community.



At the root of the controversy is a declaration by the Antiquities Advisory Board, backed by assistant professor of architecture Lee Ho-yin, center, who says Hotung villa even predates many similar mainland buildings. Lawrence Poon, right, speaking for surveyors, says the site's versatility makes a valuation hard.

On Ho Min-kwan's situation, Lee says, she should accept a land swap, which would mean she "can build a lot of houses and make a lot of money."

As for her line that she wants to redevelop the gardens "out of love," Lee was cutting in saying it was "out of greed."

Ho Min-kwan had claimed in the wake of last month's protection decision that she was acting out of love for the gardens and not seeking money when she sought to demolish the mansion.

### 'Deeply offensive'

The preservation decision, she argued, "unfairly undermined" her devotion to her grandfather's legacy, and it was "deeply offensive" to suggest "that my motives are somehow driven by profit rather than what is in the best interests of Ho Tung Gardens... I am not a real estate developer. I am a homeowner, and Ho Tung Gardens is my family home."

She also said there was no intention to change the character of the gardens, including the pool and the pagoda.

On the money side of the matter, Institute of Surveyors spokesman Lawrence Poon Wing-cheung says he can't provide an estimate of the worth of the land at Ho Tung Gardens. "You can have many kinds of development designs on the site," he says, and the beautiful outlook from the gardens would add a hefty sum to the value of Peak land.

Carrie Lam also addresses the big money involved, saying the government would not be adding to the sum that stands to be paid in compensation when the land swap is factored in. Land that would be offered to Ho Min-kwan, she says, would be a plot that would not be destined for auction.

That doesn't count for much with Poon. Once land is given away, he says, the government loses the chance to sell it for billions of dollars.

He also questions the money that could go on preserving Ho Tung Gardens in its entirety. "Is the high cost of conservation worth it?"

While lawmakers have yet to sink their teeth into Ho Tung Gardens, the Democratic Party's Lee Wing-tat says he has concerns about there being many private buildings of historic value, and owners may try to capitalize on the preservation push.

But Alexander Hui isn't too worried on that score. "It's actually good news if the government is willing to step up and conserve sites that the public agrees should be conserved. If the sites satisfy certain criteria, they should be conserved." phila.siu@singtaonewscorp.com



## TOWN BUZZ

Ivy Ong-Wood brings you the must-see and must-do events over the week.

### Friday November 25

In **Safety Island**, artist Sarah Lai explores her sense of estrangement with the familiar by juxtaposing her dreamy paintings with the natural landscape. Today till December 23 at Gallery Exit, 1 Shin Hing Street, Central. [www.galleryexit.com](http://www.galleryexit.com)

### Saturday November 26

Let your kids shed excess energy with Scotty and Lulu in **Kiddy Keep Fit**. The dance party features songs, kid-friendly yoga, games and slapstick. Shows at 10am, 2pm and 4.30pm today at HKJC Amphitheatre, Academy for Performing Arts, Wan Chai. [www.scottylulu.com](http://www.scottylulu.com)

### Sunday November 27

**Treasure Auctioneer's** autumn auction and previews offers over 2,000 art works, watches, jewels and ceramics. The jewel in the collection is a rare vase from the Qing dynasty, valued at up to HK\$20 million. Today till Thursday at HKEC and Grand Hyatt. [www.treasure-auction.com](http://www.treasure-auction.com)

### Monday November 28

Austrian soprano Elisabeth Freundlinger returns for the Karen kids annual charity Christmas concert, **A Celebration Of Life**. Part of the proceeds will go to help children hit by the March 11 tsunami in Japan. 7.30pm at St John's Cathedral, Garden Road, Central. [www.karenkids.org](http://www.karenkids.org)

### Tuesday November 29

Get a back rub or a foot massage by Spa Prima when you buy any item of jewelry at The Mustard Seed Workshop's **Jewelry Champagne Party**. 10am today and tomorrow at Casa, G/F, 8 Rednaxela Terrace, Mid-Levels. [www.themustardseedworkshop.com](http://www.themustardseedworkshop.com)

Christmas with a local flavor is on offer at **Din-dong Christmas Anime Gallery**. Animation team postgal has created a giant pop-up card for you to take photos in, or you can take part in workshops to sketch or create your own din-dong from milk cartons. Till January 1 at Olympian City 2. [www.olympiancity.com.hk](http://www.olympiancity.com.hk)

### Thursday December 1

Get snap happy at Cityplaza's **Silver Screen Christmas Delights**, which has backdrops for you to get your best holiday shots in. There will also be performances by soap-bubble artists, an Australian theatrical troupe and Canadian illusionist Richard Forget. Today till January 2 at Cityplaza, Tai Koo. [www.cityplaza.com](http://www.cityplaza.com)

Angels made with over 100,000 pieces of mosaic float all over Pacific Place as part of its **My Angel. My Christmas. My Place** theme. From today till January 1, spend over HK\$3,800 and get a Kate Spade notebook set. Plus, musicians The Bottle Boys and acrobatic duo Snow Globe will be performing from December 8 to 27. Pacific Place, Admiralty. [www.pacificplace.com.hk](http://www.pacificplace.com.hk)

A collection of 10 antique model trains from Berlin's Deutsches Technikmuseum makes a stop at **The Landmark**, which has been transformed into a winter wonderland. And if you spend above HK\$50,000 at Central malls, you can enter a draw to win luxury holidays. Today till December 31 at The Landmark, Central. [www.centralhk.com](http://www.centralhk.com)